

## **The First Christmas by pathvain aelien**

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**Summary:** Eleven goes Christmas shopping.

## The First Christmas

Author's note: I have no idea why the title formatting is so weird for some of the other stories, but I'm working on fixing it. Thank you for reading and please review if you liked it (or if you hated it, I'll take what I can get).

### The First Christmas

Hopper relents and lets Eleven out in public again after her memorable first outing. He's not wild about it, and he stood his ground for as long as he could until Joyce put her foot down. *Both* feet. Again. He tries to pretend like he's the one that makes the decisions here even though it sure doesn't seem that way anymore, and gives them a couple of conditions. She *must not use her power*. She must not *threaten* to use her power. *Even if they see Troy and James*. Hopper doesn't come right out and say it, but seems to imply that Mike should just let his ass get kicked if that happens. Mike immediately picks up on the innuendo and agrees. Honestly, he's used to it by now, because he's had a lot of practice.

*They have to stay in the square*. That rules out the arcade and bowling and pretty much everything else except for shopping. Mike can think of a few (dozen) more interesting things he'd rather do, but he'll take what he can get. He needs to buy some Christmas presents anyway, and Eleven has only ever been in a grocery store. Once. And it didn't end well, for the store at least. He's explained about payment and has told her she can't just walk out with whatever she wants and he reassures Hopper that everything will be *fine*. Hopper is skeptical but he doesn't really have a choice. They aren't *leaving* him one. He only allows the outing because Joyce will be nearby, working a double shift. Her register is right next to the window and she can keep an eye on them.

Joyce brings the kids with her to work and admonishes them to be careful. Will is with Jonathan at the movies, and Dustin and Lucas are at the arcade. They may meet up with their friends later, but they have zero interest in shopping. *Negative* interest, really. And they know that Mike probably wants Eleven to himself, anyway. It will be the first time since she's been back.

"Okay guys, I'll be right here if you need me, okay? Come back here when you're finished and I'll call Hopper to pick you up." She thinks about it for a second and throws Hopper a bone. "Actually, come back here and check in with me every...half hour? That sound good?" Mike tries not to roll his eyes. He takes Eleven's safety very seriously but it's *broad daylight* outside. Crowded square. It's not like anyone will just pull out a gun and try to kidnap her *here*. He reflects on the men with guns and all the vans that chased them right down the middle of suburbia, and amends that opinion. Still, Eleven can handle them easily. If needed.

Eleven is looking around the store. She's just happy to be out of the cabin, and to buy presents for the people on her list. Mike's explained presents to her, and Hopper's given her money, and she's ready. She waves goodbye to Joyce when she sees Mike at the door, waiting. He's examining a nativity display near the door and doesn't notice Eleven until she starts to open it. He hastily pushes in front of her, colliding with her, in his rush to be a gentleman.

"Oops, sorry," he mutters as she knocks into the display and catches her balance. The wise men rain down to the floor along with the baby Jesus, who rolls out of sight. *Suave*, he thinks, and starts to turn red. He avoids looking at Joyce. At Eleven. At the baby Jesus, wherever He might be.

"After you," he says gamely. Eleven looks bewildered and Joyce stifles a laugh. Eleven tentatively exits the building and Mike follows. She looks back once at Joyce, who shrugs and smiles. Mike strides ahead of her, avoiding her gaze because she's looking at him cautiously.

"So um, what do you want to look at first?" He asks. Eleven's puzzlement grows because he seems to be talking to a trash can. She shrugs. "Right, duh. You don't know the stores," he says. Takes a breath. Collects himself. "Well, do you know what you want to get?" He shakes his head before she can because she probably has no inkling, no idea of the kind of stuff that stores carry anyway. Except for Eggs. "Never mind, we'll figure that out. Who do you need to buy for?"

She's looking in the window of an antique store. There are little heads with wigs and funny hats on them. She doesn't see the point of the

heads. Who would want one of those? Will her friends want one for Christmas? *She* wouldn't, but she likes her friends very much. She'll pretend to be happy if they give her a head. She wouldn't mind another wig though. Her hair is still very short and she's disappointed with the color. She didn't realize it would be so dark. It's like Mike's hair. She likes Mike's hair a lot but she thinks vaguely that he might have wanted her to have a different color than his since he's probably used to looking at his own. She realizes that Mike is talking to her and looks at him, replaying what he said in her mind.

"The people on my list," she says.

"Oh great, you made a list?" He asks. That should make it easier to get whatever she needs. She nods.

"Yes. Last year." He's not sure he understands her very well, which is unusual for him.

"You made a Christmas list last year?" That strikes him as odd, considering that she barely knew anyone last year, and she wasn't around for Christmas anyway.

"No, not a Christmas list. *My* list." She enunciates it carefully because Mike is looking a little lost. It doesn't seem to help though, because he still looks lost.

"What's *your* list then?"

She remembers then, that most people don't keep lists. He doesn't know what she means.

"The list of people I like," she says and he laughs. Not in a mean way, and she's grateful for that. "Oh. Okay. Well, who's on it?" She doesn't need to look at it, because she's had it memorized since she began it.

"Should I say them in order?" She asks. She just wants to be sure she's doing it correctly, being as obliging as possible since he's helping her shop.

"In order? What order?"

She meets his eyes. "In order of who I like best." He doesn't laugh

again because she's looking a little unsure. And because it's just sweet.

"Um, if you want," he says. He sees her hesitate. "Or just go in whatever order you want." She nods again.

"Okay. Steve."

He can't hide his surprise. "*Steve?*" He's not aware that she's ever actually talked to Steve. But maybe she doesn't mean *Steve Harrington*. Although he's pretty sure that he knows everyone she's ever met. Unless she's buying presents for people in the lab? That would be pretty mental. He gives his head a shake to clear it. "Steve Harrington?" he inquires. She shrugs.

"Steve. The one with the hair."

Yep, that's Steve Harrington.

"But...*why?*" he asks. She looks a little hurt so he tries to soften his words. "I don't mean it in a bad way; it's just, you know, have you ever *talked* to him before?"

"No."

He mulls it over and realizes that she must still be a little confused about how presents work. She doesn't have to buy them for *everyone she's ever met*. He just needs to explain it better. "Okay, it's just that, you know, you don't have to buy presents for everyone. I'm not getting *him* anything, but I'm getting something for *Dustin*, you see? You just get them for like, family and friends. The people you *like*."

"I like Steve," she says. And she does. He's the most recent addition to her list. Mike backtracks.

"I know, I mean, I like him too and everything. I didn't mean *like* as in, the opposite of *dislike*. I just mean that presents are for the people you really like. A lot."

"I really like Steve," she tells him. "A lot."

Mike makes a strangled little sound and she watches him curiously.

Does she have a crush on Steve or something? He sincerely hopes not. He wants to know and doesn't want to know at the same time. He won't ask. "Do you have a crush on him or something?" he asks, immediately. Can't resist. His voice sounds abnormally high to his own ears.

"*Crush?*" she asks him. She's thinking of the tests. She's crushed things before. She would never crush *Steve*.

"Yeah it's...it's. A crush is...a crush is when...never mind," he gives up. She's looking at him, a little nervous because he sounds upset. Is he angry with her? "Just, um. *What is it* about him you like? You don't know him very well." The words come out before he can stop them. "He used to be kind of a *jerk*, actually. A *mouth breather*." He's suddenly overcome with a deep hatred for Steve. It surprises him because he's never given him much of a thought before. He bites his lip to keep from saying anything else, well aware that he's acting like an idiot. He'll change the subject instead, although it's really beyond his comprehension why Steve is such a ladies man. They all seem to just *love* his hair and he *just doesn't get it*. His hair is really stupid looking, in Mike's opinion. "*Is it his hair!*" He realizes that he's barked it instead of just asking like a normal person and breathes. Gathers himself.

"Hair?"

"Um, a lot of people like him because of his hair."

"Why?"

"Good question," he mutters angrily. "I have *no* idea. Is that it, though? You like his *hair*?" She thinks about it carefully because it seems important to him. She's not sure what's wrong with Mike but it's making her worried. He doesn't seem to be having fun with her at all. She doesn't know how to answer. Steve has hair, and hair is *always* nice. She doesn't feel anything particularly strongly about his, though. She suddenly remembers the original question. Mike wants to know why Steve is on her list. He is not on her list because of his hair.

"No."

Mike stops glaring at the trash can. "No?"

Eleven can see that he looks suddenly hopeful. Maybe he's worried about his own hair? She understands that feeling and hastens to reassure him. "No. I like yours better," she says earnestly. Sweetly. His heart gives a pathetic jerk and he feels himself blush. He looks back at the trash can.

"Oh. Okay. Um, good." A pause. "Thanks," he says as an afterthought. He realizes that they are still standing outside the store and Joyce is looking at them through the window curiously. Eleven smiles at him, since he looks less annoyed. He smiles back. Remembers the point of this whole conversation and tries again.

"So, how did Steve earn a place on your list?" She answers immediately and he realizes he was just phrasing it wrong and confusing them both.

"He fought the monsters, and helped Dustin and Lucas," she tells him. And when she says it like that, it makes sense. He feels better when she adds, apropos of nothing, "he's last on my list. I like him the least of all the people that I like. For now." He's curious to hear more about her list but they need to actually get to the shopping part of their shopping trip so he starts walking. Eleven follows.

"Who else?" She thinks about it carefully.

"Hopper."

That one's logical but it presents a problem. He's not exactly the present type. Mike only knows one thing that Hopper likes, and they can't exactly hit up a liquor store.

"Okay, anyone else?"

She happily lists the rest of her names. Some of them make sense to him and some of them just don't. He doesn't ask her to explain them, but makes a mental note. He's very curious about her list. He's particularly curious about where she's placed *him*.

"Anyone else?" he asks.

"Yes. Mr. Clarke."

"*Mr. Clarke?!"*

An hour later they are nearly finished. They've deposited their bags with Joyce so they don't have to carry them around. They aren't going to shop for each other together. He's tried to gently guide her into suitable gifts, or at least gifts that *make sense*, and he's somewhat succeeded. She's enjoyed seeing everything that stores have to offer and seems content even in the hardware store. He's enjoyed being with her and just learning the way she thinks. Her choices seem bizarre until she explains them and then suddenly they are completely appropriate. Strange, but perfect somehow. Like Eleven herself. He watches her lean close to the window of Paw-some Pet's and smiles at the back of her head. He still can't believe she's here. *Alive. Safe.* That he can see her whenever-well, almost whenever-he wants. She looks back at him and sees him watching her intently. He looks happy so she smiles at him.

He moves a little closer, stands near her shoulder and looks in with her. "Want to go in? They have a lot of cool stuff," he says. He sees her nod and opens the door for her, more cautiously this time. She smiles her thanks and walks in. Gazes around in surprise. There are animals everywhere. All different kinds. Mike walks towards the bird cages and she follows him. The birds are loud and there are feathers everywhere. She's seen birds before, but they had a lot more room to fly. No cages. Mike sticks his index finger through the cage slat and a bright green bird touches it once with its beak.

"Mike. Why?"

He turns toward her. "Why what?" She gently rests her fingertips on the cage and looks at him. He looks at her hand, understands what she's asking. "Oh. Um, so people can keep them as pets." She's still resting her fingers on the cage. She looks at the green bird and he looks back. Flutters his bright feathers.

"But-they can't fly in there."

He's never really thought about it before. Eleven looks unhappy. "Um. Yeah. I guess they can't. Some people let them fly around their house

and just leave the cage open so they can go in and out when they want," he reassures her. Eleven flattens her hand against the cage and watches the birds. Sighs. She looks upset and he would like to think that he's never seen that look on her face before. But he has. It's a *broken* look. She had it the first time they met. He would like to erase that look for her but he's not sure how. "They aren't-they're probably *happy*, El. See?" He points. "They have food and toys and water and everything."

She doesn't respond. Instead, she straightens and looks around. *All* of the animals are in cages. Or behind glass. They are being kept prisoner while people walk by, point at them, prod them into doing whatever they want. She sees a couple of people in front of the mice. There's a mouse sleeping in his little bed. A teenager raps hard on the glass and the mouse startles awake. It squeaks and hides. The people laugh. The sound makes her feel hollow inside because it's not a *mean* laugh. They aren't aware that they are doing anything wrong. *Like Papa*. She suddenly feels sad. Not-normal and different. It's the *lonely Eleven feeling* she sometimes gets. She wonders if it will ever go away. Forever.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"People shouldn't...they shouldn't keep things in cages."

Mike suddenly understands. He's aware that his mouth is hanging open and he has no idea what to say. *Jesus*. He just looks at her, eyes wide. She turns her head to regard him and his feelings overwhelm him. There are too many to even identify.

"I know. I'm sorry. But...it's not like that. Like it was for you. They're *safe*. The people that buy them take good care of them. They could get hurt if they were in the wild now because they've never been. They're different from wild birds. They wouldn't know how to survive like them and it's too late for them to learn. They wouldn't know what to do. They-". She gives a little pained breath, almost a sob. Her face has that look on it. The one he saw when Lucas called her a monster. A *freak*. He wasn't thinking and he can't take it back. He bites his lip so hard it makes him gasp. His face feels hot and he

suddenly feels awful.

What the *fuck* are you *doing*. You wastoid.

Eleven has looked away from him but he can see her face. It's gone distant. She's got the old thousand yard stare, the one she had those first few days. The one that is remote and unreachable. The one that says there is nothing in there anymore. She is just all eyes again. He puts a hand on her shoulder. "El-El, I didn't mean it like *that*. I'm not talking about *you*. *You* aren't like that," he croaks. She doesn't look at him. "El. *That's not you*." She still doesn't look at him but she whispers a response. "It is me."

"No! You aren't like that!"

"I *am*. I don't...know things. I don't know what to...do either." She looks mortified and he hates himself for hurting her. "El. *No*. That's okay. That's not your fault. You didn't do *anything* wrong. And you're doing great. You're going to be *fine*." He stresses the last word. Pats her shoulder clumsily. She's looking down and he can see tears in her eyes.

"I'm a...freak."

"No! You are not a freak, El."

"I am. I'm not...*normal*."

"So? Who gives a shit?"

"Everyone," she says sadly.

"That's *bullshit*. The people who feel that way are *assholes*. Normal is fucking boring. You're *awesome*," he says hotly. She doesn't respond. He turns her slightly, gets right in front of her. He puts a finger under chin to make her meet his eyes. "*You are awesome*," he says, enunciating every word. She looks at him for a long time without responding. "Mike."

"Yeah?"

She watches his face carefully. Asks him her greatest fear. "What if

I'm *never* normal?"

"Good," he says. She studies his eyes. It's easy to do because his face is so close. His fingers are touching her cheek.

"Good?"

"Yeah, *good*. I hope you aren't. I hope you're always like this. I mean, like...happier, obviously. But I hope you're still you."

"But...why?" And she honestly sounds baffled. Like it's inconceivable that anyone could want that.

"Because we all like you like this. We like you just the way you are. *I* like you the way you are." She doesn't exactly smile, but one corner of her mouth turns up slightly. She opens her mouth to ask *the question* but he beats her to it.

"Yes. I promise." Her smile is a little bigger now and he smiles back at her. Drops his fingers from her face and steps back. "El?" She raises her eyebrows questioningly.

"I'm really sorry."

"For what?" Haltingly.

"For hurting you. I didn't mean to."

"I know," she says. "It's okay." He looks miserable and near tears and she puts her arm around him. Leans her forehead down and rests it on his shoulder. "It's okay, Mike. I'm okay." His arms come up automatically and encircle her in a hug. He rests his temple against her face. They stand that way for a few moments until Mike gently lets go. Someone crowds next to them to see the birds and they move away. Eleven softly touches her hand to the cage again. "Goodbye," she says quietly. Walks away to join Mike.

"Um, so that was kind of a bust. Like, a bad idea," he says to her. "You want to go?" She nods but then he remembers something. "Hey, wait! Um. They have animals that aren't in cages." She waits. "Well, I mean, they *are*," Her eyebrows raise and he amends, "But not forever. Just while they're waiting for a home. When people take them home

they're free and can go wherever they want. No cages after that. Do you-do you want to see them? Or not, I mean, we can just go if you want." He's already regretting bringing it up again.

"I want to see them."

"You sure?" She smiles in response. She's looking happier, a little more *here*. "Okay! They're in the back. Come on." He lightly takes her wrist, careful not to actually hold her hand, and leads the way. The cats and dogs are on the back wall, in two separate rooms. There's a glass wall in between them and the cages. She stops in front of the glass but he takes her hand again-this time actually touching her hand-and walks towards the dogs. He's moving towards a door and she hesitates.

"It's okay, we can go in. We can pet them and stuff," he says. He opens it and leads her in, dropping her hand. They stop in front of each cage, petting each dog in turn. Mike doesn't open the cage doors, although he knows they're allowed to. As long as they only open one at a time, anyway. There's a piece of paper attached to each cage and Eleven's attention is focused on them. "That's their bios. It tells their name and if they're boys or girls and where they came from and their personality. So people can pick the one they like best." They read each one together. A black lab licks Eleven's hand with an enormous tongue and she makes a disgusted face. Mike laughs. "Yeah, Will's dog is always doing that."

"It smells bad." She's looking at the lab and she's right, the dog reeks. He laughs again. "Yeah, dogs are kind of stinky. You have to bathe them all the time. Some animals clean themselves. Maybe you aren't a dog person?" She shrugs one shoulder uncertainly. She likes the dogs but not especially so. Is that what he means? "That's okay. You can *like* a dog and not like, want one. That's the way I am with dogs most of the time. C'mere." He takes her hand, the hand not coated in dog saliva, and opens the other door. Not the one they came in. She hadn't noticed it before.

He lets her go first and she walks in. Sees the cages. Freezes. He notices, but thinks she's just waiting on him. He walks to the first cage and reaches in. Notices Eleven isn't next to him anymore. She's hanging back at the door, looking terrified.

"What's wrong?" He straightens up. "These are cats. You've seen cats before?" It's half a statement, half a question, because honestly he isn't sure if she has or not. He doesn't want to make her feel bad about it.

"Yes," she breathes and he relaxes.

"Okay, come on. You want to pet this one?" A black cat is rubbing himself along the cage and Mike's hand. "He's really friendly." The cat head-bumps his hand, demanding attention.

"No."

"Why not? Do you not like cats?" There's such a long silence that he pulls his hand away from the cage and turns around. "El?" She's not looking at the cats, turning her face completely away from them instead. "El?"

"...I like *them*." There's an odd inflection at the end of her sentence that he doesn't understand. "Okay...want to pet one then?" But she's already shaking her head. Emphatically. *No*. "What's wrong?"

"They...they don't. They don't like *me*."

"What? Nah. Maybe you just met a weird one. This one is really friendly, see? Want to pet him?"

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"I can't." And her voice sounds so final, so sure of herself that he just looks at her.

"Why not?"

But her mouth isn't working anymore and she can't tell him that way. Not right now. She turns her gaze from the wall and tells him with her face instead. With her eyes, hoping he understands. And this time, he does. He doesn't know exactly what happened, but he gets the essence of it.

"From...before?" he asks awkwardly. Her head nods in assent.

"Oh. Want to talk about it? You can tell me. It's okay. Or not." And she knows it's true. He'll understand either way. Knowing that makes it easier to tell him the normal way. The way with words. She nods slightly. He sits down with his back against the wall, away from the cages. She eases herself in the space next to him. She's not sure how to begin but he just waits patiently. He can wait all day. All *year*. Whatever she needs.

"Papa," she says. Looks at him, her eyes asking a question. She wants to know if he understands. He does. He most definitely remembers the man she called Papa. That last night. When she reached out to him and he couldn't help her. Mike gives a slight nod to show his comprehension.

"I remember. What about him?"

It's so hard to explain, to speak more than a few words at a time. "I had to...do the tests." He waits.

She doesn't continue so he asks, "what kind of tests?"

She doesn't meet his eyes. "Different things. Lots of tests. Sometimes..." she trails off and he gives her a minute. "I had to find people. In the bath." He nods again. "Listen to them. The-the radio." She takes a quick peek at his face and he smiles. "It's okay. I know. Like you did with Will." She turns her face back towards her knees, drawn up to her chest.

"Yes. Like Will. Sometimes...there were other tests. Papa-Papa would bring in things. To the bright room." She takes a breath. Tries not to get lost in the memory. The first day she refused to cooperate. "Once. At the beginning. I crushed cans." He waits. *That explains her reaction at the bowling alley.* "Then...when I was stronger. Other things. Bricks. Concrete." She enunciates the last word carefully. "And each time...I got...*stronger*." The last word makes her gasp. "I-they were happy. Papa was happy. That I was stronger. That I could...do more things." She remembers Papa's face. The tender smile he sometimes gave her. The excitement lurking underneath it.

You are *magnificent*, Eleven. *Good girl*.

And she had been happy, at first. Because Papa was pleased with her. Because he hugged her. She's been silent for a long time, lost in her memories, and Mike gently brings her back to the present. "What other things?"

"The tests were-were to make me stronger. Make me a...weapon." She looks at him earnestly.

"I know," he says quietly. "It's okay."

And she continues. "I...started small. Small things. Live things?" she says timidly, almost a question. To make sure he understands. That he's okay with what she's done. He's feeling tense but not *at* her, not *because* of her. He tries not to let her see. It's upsetting but it's not really a surprise. She's never, ever talked about the lab but it's not a revelation. And he can see where this is heading. Why she's upset. He takes her hand and squeezes it. Waits.

"Like...bugs. Mice. Small things. Easy things. Papa says..." He notices how she's using the present tense now, like she's still in the lab. In the memory. "Papa says *less human things*. And I-I did them. I hurt them." Another quick look at Mike, to see how he's reacting. She knows that he's seen her kill before. But that's different. Those men were going to take her. Hurt her friends. Hopper has told her that it was *self-defense*, and she understands that. But the mice weren't hurting her. They were just mice, and she's ashamed of herself.

"It's okay," he tells her. She can't find the lie in his face and she thinks it's true, he understands what she had to do. He isn't mad. He isn't mad at her yet.

"And...Papa brings in a cat." She's completely lost in the memory now. When she usually speaks, it's hesitant. Careful. If she has to speak more than a sentence, the words come out even more slowly. In bits and pieces.

Now her voice speeds up because she's getting distraught. "I'm in the room. It's so bright. Just a table and my chair. The cat. I'm wearing the wires. Papa is watching me through the glass. The other men are

there but Papa watches me. Papa is waiting for me. I'm looking at *her*. She's white. Soft. She's scared. I...I get to pet her before the test. I don't know what the test is then.

Papa gives her to me. Tells me what to do. I...I can feel her mind with mine. I have to, to do the test. I can feel how scared she is. She's scared of *me*. I'm-I'm hurting her. I can feel her hurt. I'm crying. *I can do this*. She's smaller than me. Easy. I will do it fast so it doesn't hurt but I can't. I can't go fast. I don't want to. I look at Papa. Papa knows I don't want to. He's angry. I know that-I'll be punished. If I don't. I'll have to be alone in the dark room. The small room. It scares me.

I connect with her mind again. Hurt her. She hisses at me but can't get away. Can't do anything. I can feel how much she hates me for hurting her. I know everything about her. I know-I know she has babies. She wants to be with them. She wants to protect them. From me. From later tests. I feel *everything* about her. She is so angry and so sad because...she knows I will hurt them, too. She knows she can't stop me. It hurts her." Mike's holding her hand in a painful grip but Eleven doesn't notice. She's not seeing anything except the bright room. "*Then I feel it*. I feel her give up. She knows she can't help them and she gives up. She...part of her dies inside. Because she knows she can't do anything. It's horrible. I hate it. I stop. I look at Papa. I shake my head, no. *No. No. No.* I won't do it. I rip the wires off."

He thinks she's finished. She's gasping, staring intently into space. Her eyes are enormous and she's crying. He starts to put an arm around her, stops when she continues. "Papa is angry. The men with the guns grab me. They pull me. They drag me down the long hallway. Papa is watching me. He's not coming with me. I scream for him to help me. He doesn't say anything. He's punishing me. They open the door to the dark room. I try to get away. They pick me up and throw me. I land on the floor. It hurts. They're going to shut the door and leave me in the dark. They always leave me for a long time. No food. I don't like being alone. I don't like the dark. I'm crying. I-I get up. Turn around. I throw one of them into the wall. The wall breaks and he falls. *He's dead*. The other takes out his gun and he's going to shoot me. *Papa wouldn't like that*. I break his neck. He's dead. They're *both* dead.

I'm so tired now. I've never used so much of my mind before. It hurts.

I'm bleeding. I'm on the floor. I can't feel anything now. Papa is here. He holds my head. Gentle. I think he will be so angry but he makes me look at him. I do. He's so happy. Excited. Proud. He says *I am incredible*. He picks me up. Gentle. Carries me out of the dark room away from the dead men. Not punished. *Rewarded*. Papa spends time with me. He gives me a toy. Good food. *Holds me*."

There's a beat of silence.

"But later. The cat. The babies. Papa...Papa makes the men kill them. They bring the bodies. Leave them in my room. Tell me that they will get another mother cat. More babies. That they will keep the next babies *safe* if I do the test."

She's finally finished. She can feel Mike's sweaty hand inside hers. It's holding hers too tightly but it feels good. She's afraid to look at him, now that he knows. Knows exactly how not-*normal* she is. She thinks he won't like her so much now. He doesn't say anything and she cries harder. She rests her head on her knees, turns her face away from him. Holds her legs tightly.

"El."

She doesn't look at him. His voice sounds thick.

"El." She turns her face towards him, keeping it on her knees. He's crying, too. She drops her eyes quickly because she's made him upset. He's angry with her. "El. I'm so sorry."

She forgets herself and raises her face from her knees. "...why? Why are you sorry? It was me. My fault."

"No, it *wasn't*. That *wasn't* your fault. *Nothing* you did in there was your fault." He says it emphatically, so she hears him. So she'll understand. "I'm so sorry that you had to go through that. That you had to be there and do those things." His heart is breaking for her. *Her whole life was like that*. He can't wrap his head around it. Each time he thinks he understands, there's something else. Something worse. The fact that people, *many* people-doctors and scientists-could be so horrible. So unfeeling. More monstrous than the Demogorgon. His voice is raised and he's nearly shouting. Luckily they're alone and

there's no one near the back of the store.

"Are you...are you angry?" She asks him softly. He tilts his head back to rest on the wall and glowers at nothing.

"*Fuck. Yes, I'm angry,*" he explodes. Feels her jerk slightly and turns his head towards her. She looks terrified. "No! Not at you."

"No?"

"No! I'm angry at them. I *hate* that they did that to you. It makes me wish..."

"Wish what?"

"That I could, you know. Do what you can do." She raises her eyebrows uncertainly. "That I could beat the *shit* out of them. That I...could have been there. To stop them from doing that to you," he says fiercely. She reads his eyes and can't find the lie. Smiles a little. "Thank you," he tells her and sees her surprise.

"Why?" she asks him curiously. She told him horrible things.

"For telling me. You can tell me anything, okay? No matter how bad it is. You can trust me."

"I trust you," she says quietly. It gives him a little thrill when she says it. That she could trust someone again after all of that. That it could be *him*. She leans her head on his shoulder. "Thank you," she says. They sit there quietly together for a few minutes, until they both feel calmer. The sound of the cats meowing is soothing. She laces her fingers through his and his stomach jumps. He looks away from her dark eyes and sees the black cat staring at them. Or staring at the wall. Whatever.

"Eleven."

"Yes?"

"I know that, um. What you went through was awful. But, uh. It doesn't mean that you can't be around cats. It doesn't mean that they hate you. You just feel that way because of what happened. It

wouldn't be like that. They wouldn't hate you." She doesn't say anything. "It's just that...the bad men did so much to you. They kept you from so much."

She knows.

"And you have all of these bad memories. And they aren't going to go away."

She knows that, too.

"But that doesn't mean that you can't make any *good* memories. You *should*. You can't change what happened but you can try to make good memories out of the bad ones. Does that make sense?" He can see that it doesn't. He sighs. "You aren't with them anymore. They can't control you now. If you-if you're too scared to do something because of them, because of those memories, it's like they're still controlling you. Like you aren't free."

She considers this carefully.

"And...it will make you feel better to do those things. The things that remind you of that. Because you'll be making happy memories about those things instead. It won't get rid of the bad ones or anything. But the happy memories will be stronger. Like..." he casts his mind about for an example. "Okay. When Will went missing, he was riding his bike home from my house. Where we were playing D&D. And before he could get home, he was taken. And then he was stuck in the Upside Down and it was horrible. But he *came back*. And like, he could have been afraid of riding his bike or playing the game or being over at my house or whatever. Because all of those things were associated with being taken. Because of the bad memories. But that didn't happen. He kept doing all of those things until he could put the bad memories behind him and focus on the good ones. Understand?" He feels like it's a lame example but it's the best he could come up with. Her bad memories are a lot different, and she feels guilty about them, not just afraid.

"Yes. I understand."

Mike stands up and pulls her up, too. "Okay. So, you can pet the cats

if you want. Make good memories. They won't hate you, I promise," and the word makes her meet his eyes immediately. She nods.

"Okay."

She's raised her head and she has that fierce, brave look on her face. The one that she used when she told them about the bath. She was terrified but she knew it was what they wanted. It makes him feel a little guilty. Her Papa tried to talk her into things she didn't want to do. Although it's different from that, it's also not. He doesn't want to force her to do something she doesn't want to do.

"Never mind," he says quickly. "You don't have to."

"Mike?"

"I don't want you to do it because you're, you know, trying to do what I want. To make me happy or whatever. It's not like that. I won't be mad or upset if you don't want to. It's whatever you want," he rambles and she cuts him off.

"I know," she tells him. "I want to." He waits and lets her lead him to the first cage. He puts his hand out and the cat rubs it. He scratches its ears. Eleven is watching him. He keeps his hand on the cat and waits for her to try. Or not. Whatever she chooses.

She tentatively stretches out her other hand, the one that isn't interlaced with Mike's. She puts it through the bars but doesn't do anything else. Doesn't touch it. Hesitates. Mike doesn't say a word, just goes back to petting the cat. She lightly brushes her fingers over his back and sighs. The cat stretches toward her touch and she laughs. Pets him. Mike feels a weight roll off of his chest. One that he didn't know he was carrying. That maybe she'll be okay. She'll be happy. Someday. She removes her hand-both of her hands-and walks to the next cage.

"This one really seems to like you, don't you want to stay here?"

"No. He's hungry."

Mike looks at the cat. The yellow eyes are slits. He's purring and seems to be enjoying the attention. "How do you know?" he asks. "He

doesn't seem hungry. His food is right there."

"He's hungry, but *you're* there. And he likes you, so he'll wait." She isn't looking at him, she's petting the next cat. A skinny yellow one.

"How do you know that?" She glances at him with a little frown. Like he should understand what she means. "I can feel it," she says. Mike drops his hand away from the cat. Moves to the next one, beside her.

"You can read his mind when you aren't using your powers?" She doesn't say anything for a minute.

"Not read. *Feel*. Yes."

Mike suddenly feels hot. It's hard to swallow. He hasn't really thought about it before, how far her powers extend. He knows that she was able to sense Will. Find him. That she was able to sense when Mike and the others were in danger, and come back.

*Is she able to read everyone's mind? Like, all of the time?*

He isn't sure. She had no idea that the bad men were coming to Mike's house. That they were coming to the school that night. Wouldn't she have been able to read their minds and just know? Or did she need to be close to them to do it? Or touching them? Or just actively looking for them, individually? Or...? He cuts off the babbling thoughts. Or attempts it, anyway. *Can she read my mind? Right now? All of the time? Or just when she tries? And how much?* He can't breathe. Is that why it sometimes feels like they can talk without actually talking? He hopes that she can't. He tries to clear his mind of any and all thought but doesn't succeed.

*Fuck. I think about kissing her sometimes.*

He hastily thinks about the next D&D campaign. The one that El will join. The one that will mean that he gets to spend more time with her.

*I think about kissing her a lot. And then immediately, shut the fuck up!*

He thinks about his science homework. Mr. Clarke is awesome. Eleven met Mr. Clarke. He kissed Eleven that last night. It felt nice. It

felt *amazing*. She'd seemed so surprised, but then she'd smiled. They haven't talked about it because this is the first time they've been alone since then. He forces his mind to think about something else. Hopper! He hasn't forgiven him. Never will. Not for keeping her a secret for a year. It was a fucking shitty thing to do, to let everyone think she was dead. Or hurt. Scared. But Eleven likes him. Hopper's been acting nicer. Friendlier. Maybe Eleven's thawed him out a little. Hopper interrupted their goodbye, before she went to close the gate. She had moved toward him. Like she was going to kiss him.

*Fuck.*

It's not working. The more he tries not to think about it, the more he thinks about it anyway. Maybe he can test it out. She's not paying any attention to him. She's moved on to the next cat.

*Eleven? Can you hear me?*

She turns towards him immediately and he jumps. Turns red. . *What the fuck am I supposed to do now?*

"Mike?"

"Um."

"Mike?" she asks it, in a gentle voice. He avoids all eye contact. His face is burning.

"Yeah?"

"Are you...are you okay?"

"Yep."

She's watching him with anxiety now. He looks sick all of a sudden.

"Mike." She moves closer to him. Very close. Gazes at him in concern. He doesn't look at her even though she's right here.

"Mhm?" He stares blankly at a cat as if he's fascinated by it. She touches his face lightly and he jumps, jerks his eyes toward her. Her eyes are enormous and worried. Dark. Pretty. *She's very pretty. Fuck.*

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing! Nothing."

"Mike...*friends don't...*"

"Lie. I know."

"Tell me."

"Um. Did you, did you hear me?"

"Hear you? When?"

"Just now."

She's clearly confused. "Yes...you're talking to me now. I hear you."

"No, I meant. Like. In my mind." Her fingers retreat and she looks at him askance.

"Your mind?"

"Yeah. I...I said your name. *In my mind*. I asked if you could hear me."

"Why?"

"To see if...you could read my mind?"

"Oh."

He feels frantic. "Well, did you? Hear?"

"No." He breathes such a huge sigh of relief that she looks a little hurt.

"What were...what were you thinking?" A beat of silence, then she finishes. "About me?" She looks downcast.

"Nothing bad!"

"No?"

"No!"

"Good?"

"Um. Yeah. Yes. I just wondered if you know, if you could read everyone's mind all the time. Like how that works."

"Not reading. *Feeling*."

"Yeah, that." It sounds exactly the same to him.

"I can't."

"No?"

"Not really." That's a hell of a lot less definitive and his heart sinks. "I could hear what you're saying, if I wanted to. What you're doing. When I'm not around. Especially if I were in the bath. That's how I knew you were in danger. I could find you, if I wanted."

"How can you do that without reading my mind?" She gives a little sigh. It's hard to explain.

"I can *feel* your mind. Where you are. Not what you're thinking. What you're saying. I can see you, with the blindfold. If I'm in the bath, I can see you." He turns red because she's not aware of the innuendo in that statement. She waits, to see if he understands.

"But-sometimes it seems like we talk without talking. *Like I can hear you*."

"You can. I hear you, too, sometimes."

"But, that's mind reading. Right?"

"No."

"No?"

"That's different. I can hear what you say if you really try. If you're thinking *at* me."

"But. I just *was*." She shrugs.

"I think we both have to be doing it. Thinking at each other at the same time."

"Oh."

"Does that...does that bother you?"

He hesitates before answering because he really doesn't know the answer. It's kind of cool. He likes being close to her that way. Being special to her. It's also kind of terrifying. "...No. It's just, um. I wouldn't want anyone to be able to read my mind all the time. Without me trying to send thoughts. You know?"

"Mike. I *wouldn't*. Not unless..."

"Not unless what?"

"Not unless I sensed you. That you were hurt. Not *safe*."

"How can you sense me without reading my mind? Is it because I'm sending thoughts then and don't even know it?"

"It's just..." she struggles to explain. Doesn't really have the words for it. "Just *sensing*. I don't know. *Instinct*. But not...not everything. If you were thinking that you were going to walk out the door, I wouldn't know. Not unless we were thinking at each other."

"But you knew the cat was hungry."

"That's a *cat*. It's easy." And he has to content himself with that even though he's confused as hell.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"What were you thinking?"

"Nothing important."

"Then why...why were you so worried?" Mike sighs. "It was just...kind of embarrassing."

"Why?"

"Because it was about you." He's turning red again.

Eleven watches the color spread across his cheeks with interest. "Oh. What about me?"

"Nothing, really."

"Mike."

"*Nothing*. It was just, like, kind of sappy. Embarrassing. That I'm just glad you're back." It's not a lie, exactly. It's only half a lie. He is glad she is back. She's still looking at him curiously and he moves away towards the end of the row. Sees a purring kitten pile. He can't tell how many are in the pile, it's just a soft fuzzy ball of fur.

"El! Look. Persians." She brightens, and it seems like the previous discussion is over. Mike is suddenly overcome with gratitude for kittens.

"Want to hold one?"

"Can I?"

"Sure." He opens the cage and moves to one side so she can reach them. She touches one gently. It feels incredibly soft. It opens its eyes and looks at her sleepily. Mike gently detaches it from the other three. He hands it to her and she cradles it. It's so small. She pets it gingerly, being careful not to hurt it. Hugs it to her chest. It purrs and she smiles. It lights up her whole face and his heart nearly stops. He's never seen her so happy. So *carefree*. She looks beautiful. It's sappy and cheesy and he's aware that he's staring at her with a stupid expression on his face and he honestly doesn't care. She opens her eyes and smiles at him. He grins back. She hands it back to him carefully.

"You can keep it for awhile," he tells her, but she shakes her head immediately.

"She doesn't want to be away from her brothers. She misses them." He takes the kitten and places her near the others. The kitten snuggles

into the pile and appears to go to sleep. Mike closes the door and makes sure it's latched. They turn to go. Walk to the end of the square, back to Joyce. It feels like an eternity-in the best possible way-but it's only been an hour since they last checked in. When the store is in sight, Eleven's footsteps falter. Mike comes to a stop, too.

Eleven moves closer to him. There's a mischievous smile on her face he's never seen before. She looks at him intently, dark eyes playful and serious at the same time. He meets her eyes, trying to read what she's telling him.

*Mike. Thank you.*

He's not sure if he imagined it or if he almost heard it. If he *heard* it.

*You're welcome. Thank you.* Their gazes are still locked. He decides to test it, see if she can actually hear him this time. Or if he's imagining it because of what happened earlier.

*Eleven. Can you hear me?*

"Yes," she says immediately. He starts to laugh and then hears or *almost* hears her voice again. He can feel it. Or *almost* feel it. Light. Gentle. Like feeling her hand within his.

*Mike. What do you want for Christmas?*

He replies aloud. "You don't have to get me anything." It's the automatic response when anyone asks this question. He would feel like an asshole to actually start listing things off and basically demanding that people buy them for him.

*I want to. What do you want?*

And because he's thinking, he doesn't filter it like he would with his voice. He can't. He has the feeling that he can't lie like this, or send anything less than the absolute truth.

*I already have what I want.*

He can feel the question in her mind-in *his* mind-and continues.

*I'm just glad you're home. Safe. That you're here. That's all I want.*

*Me, too.*

She's looking at him with wide eyes and he can read everything in them. Right now at least. Without meaning to, he thinks, *her eyes are really nice*. And, since they're already connected, she hears it. He can tell. He starts to blush but she looks pleased.

*Pretty?*

*Yeah. Really pretty.*

They smile at each other at the same time.

Will is pestering Joyce for some change for the arcade while Lucas and Dustin restore the nativity scene. He met up with Lucas and Dustin after the movies, and they're going to try to break the top score on Dig Dug. Again. Joyce stands up to grab her purse. She can't really deny him anything, not after he's been back from the dead. Twice. While she's rooting for quarters in the coin pocket, she sees Mike and Eleven standing outside. They are, apparently, lost in each other's eyes. She smiles a little and turns around, hands the change over. Doesn't say a word. She doesn't have to. One of them has already noticed. Dustin lightly taps Lucas on the shoulder with a shepherd and presses his face against the glass, cupping a hand over his forehead to cut the glare.

"Shit. *They're doing it again!*" Lucas doesn't even need to ask. He hurriedly drops a wise man and pushes up next to his friend. "So weird," Lucas breathes, watching them with interest. Their faces are less than a foot away from each other. Neither one of them is blinking.

"Not normal at all." Dustin agrees, while Joyce tries to gently shoo them away from the window. She straightens the wise men as she gives into curiosity and peeks out at the kids. Sees their gaze. Intense. Both of their faces inscrutable until, at the same moment, they smile at each other. Mike turns red. She looks like she's about to laugh. They smile at each other again, at the exact same time.

"Huh." Joyce says.

"I know, *right*?" Dustin asks her.

"Is that not just, like, a little bit weird?" Lucas queries, but Joyce doesn't reply. Will has joined them in the window and she puts an arm around him. Hugs him a little. Will smiles up at her and glances out the window. He sees his friends outside. He sees how content they are.

"Completely normal," he corrects.

Mike and Eleven break their mind-meld and come inside. They are both startled to see their friends-and Joyce-standing right inside the door.

"What were you guys doing?" He asks his friends. Lucas rolls his eyes and Dustin ignores him, pushing past Mike to say hello to Eleven. Eleven happily greets everyone, hugging only Will. Mike shuts the door carefully, noticing that Joyce has fixed the nativity scene. The baby Jesus is back where He belongs and looks unscathed. Dustin pokes at the bags on the counter.

"Get everything you needed?"

Eleven nods happily. "Almost," she tells him. She still has one gift left. Mike's gift. She still isn't sure what to get him, just that it has to be good. The best of all her gifts.

"What did you get *me*?" Dustin asks playfully. His eyes are twinkling. "I mean, you got *me* something, right? I *am* one of your best friends, after all," he teases.

"Yes! I did. It's-"

Mike quickly interrupts. "DUSTIN! Shut up!" He turns to Eleven. "Ignore him. You aren't supposed to know what the gifts are until Christmas morning. He's just being a wastoid." Eleven giggles and takes her bags. She can see Hopper waiting outside. Joyce waves to him and he nods.

"See you tomorrow, El!" Lucas and Dustin say in unison. They are all

meeting at Mike's to watch Christmas movies, drink hot chocolate, eat gingerbread, and just generally rot their teeth. She says goodbye to her friends rather abruptly, because Hopper's tapping his watch impatiently and raising his eyebrows. She can tell immediately, he is having a cranky day. She has noticed that he often has cranky days.

She's almost out the door and Mike's a little surprised to find that he feels slightly hurt. Like he expected to get a special goodbye or something. Something for him, *Mike*, not just as part of the group. Maybe she had a horrible time. She probably *did* have a horrible time, considering that she spent part of it crying. *Fuck*. He tells himself he's being an idiot. He realizes that he's leaning against the newly restored nativity scene and immediately takes his weight off of the table for a few seconds before leaning against it again. He turns to his friends, because he needs their help. He has no idea what to get Eleven for Christmas. The only thing she expressed any specific interest in was a wig, and he's definitely not buying her *that*. It has to be a *really good* present. The best. She-

*Mike.*

Her voice comes as a shock because she sounds like she's right next to him. When he can clearly see that she isn't. She's getting into Hopper's station wagon. He jerks and leans too hard on the nativity scene, which topples. Again. The baby Jesus rolls out of sight. Again. Along with a couple of animals. He's vaguely aware that his friends are laughing and Joyce is sighing, but those things aren't really registering. He's staring intently at Joseph, who's on the floor and looking a little chipped.

*Yeah?*

*I had a good time. Thank you.*

*You're welcome. Me, too.*

Then he stops, replays what he was just thinking. He was worried she'd had a horrible time with him. *Were you...reading my mind?* He can feel her laugh.

*No. I just wanted to say it. Tell you.*

*Oh. Thanks. See you tomorrow.* He wonders if it's possible to blush inside your own mind.

*Good night, Mike.*

He smiles a little. She never tells him goodbye anymore. Not after that last night.

*Good-*

Dustin's hands suddenly clap together right in front of his face and the connection is broken. Mike jolts in surprise again, glaring at his friend.

"Man. *Where were you?* You've just been standing here with the most idiotic expression on your face."

Mike rolls his eyes. "Gee, thanks, Dustin."

"*What?* You were. It was a little creepy, to be honest."

"How so?"

"You were just like, smiling too much. Too happy," and Lucas snorts. He's been doing that a lot lately whenever Eleven is mentioned.

"Gee, I wonder why," he asks pointedly. "What in the world could Mike have been thinking of to make him look so stupid and happy?" His voice oozes with sarcasm.

"It's not a good look for you, trust me," Dustin tells his friend seriously. Mike hits him, but carefully. He doesn't want to destroy anything else in the store today.

"Shut up. I was just wondering what to get Eleven for Christmas." He hits Dustin again and snaps, "shut up!" before Dustin has even opened his mouth.

"*What? What* did I say?" Injured, he turns to Lucas and Will for backup. "Did you guys *hear* me say anything?"

"No, but you were going to," Will tells him truthfully. Dustin rolls his

eyes.

"You JUST went shopping with her. Were you too busy staring at her to notice or what? Didn't she like *anything*?"

"Wigs," Mike says moodily, prodding a camel with his foot.

"Oh. Yeah, that pretty much blows."

"*I know that*, Dustin," he says through gritted teeth.

"Nothing else? She's never been inside a real store in her life, I'm sure she saw a ton of stuff she would want!"

"Yeah, but I wanted something really good. Something that would make her happy." For once, Lucas and Dustin are quiet. They tease him a lot about Eleven since she's been back, but not always. After all, they want to make her happy, too. And it's nice seeing Mike again. The *real* Mike. They hadn't realized how much he had changed until she came back.

Mike is about to open his mouth to ask for suggestions when it finally hits him. The perfect gift. He shuts his mouth and stares at them. They look back at him, a little alarmed. When he beams at them the alarm gets worse.

"Dude. You're doing it again. It's *creepy*, I'm telling you."

"I know what to get her! What we can *all* get her."

"I already got her a gift," Lucas pipes up immediately.

"You-you did?" Mike wasn't expecting that.

"Yep. Eggos."

Dustin turns toward him viciously. "I told you *I* was getting her Eggos! Did I not just tell you that *yesterday*?"

"She really likes eggos," Lucas tells him wisely. Dustin sighs and turns back to Mike.

"*Whatever*. Anyway, what was your big idea?"

"Well, we went to the pet store, and she looked really happy when she was holding this kitten," he starts to explain, but Dustin and Lucas drown him out immediately. He looks up at them with surprise.

"Hopper will kill you! Like, literally, kill you. He has *guns*!"

"You want to get her a *kitten*?!"

"*Guns*, Mike, guns!"

"No!"

They visibly relax. "Oh."

"I want to get her four kittens."

"*Four*?!"

It shocks Lucas and Dustin into (temporary) silence. They just goggle at him, mouths open. Dustin weakly mumbles, "guns," but otherwise they've lost the ability of speech. Will finally speaks up, since he sees they can't. "Mike, you can't get her *four cats*."

Lucas can't help it; he breaks into a fit of giggling. "*Mike*. That's a horrible present." He chokes the words out between laughter.

Mike glares at him. "No! It's not. She was holding this one and she really liked it, but she could tell that it wanted to be with its brothers..."

Lucas cuts him off. "She could *tell*?"

"Yeah. Long story."

"*Oh...kaaay*."

"Anyway, so we can each get her one," he tells them happily. He beams at them again.

"*Mike*."

"Yeah?"

"FOUR. You cannot get her *four cats*," Lucas snarls at him. The fit of laughter is over. He's a little incensed by his friend's cluelessness, considering it's going to cause Hopper to flip out and keep Eleven barricaded inside forever. Hopper will *hate* them. More than he already seems to.

"I'm not getting her *four cats*. I'm getting her *one*, singular. You guys are each getting her one, too," Mike retorts, apparently missing the point completely.

"Dude. That equals four. You-" Dustin breaks off at the look on Mike's face-"WE cannot get her four cats!"

"You *will die*. Seriously," Lucas growls again.

"You're going to turn her into my *mom*," Dustin observes. "Did you ever think about *that*, Mike? You want to give her like, a cat-lady starter kit."

Mike sighs and looks at Will. Will shrugs at the earnestness on his face. "I don't think I can really back you up on this one," he says honestly. "It sounds like a bad idea." And that's putting it mildly.

"Guys. It's a long story and she might not like, want me to say anything, but this would be *really important* to her. It would make her feel a lot more, you know, better about everything from before. It would make her *really freaking happy*."

Dustin and Lucas look at each other skeptically. Mike turns again to Will for help. Will can usually sway the other two. He attempts to give Will the kind of meaningful look Eleven always gives. Tries to tell him *why* it's so important. Will returns his look somberly for a long moment. Turns to the other guys. Nods his assent. "Looks like we're getting her cats," he says. They groan.

"FINE. But you're taking *all* responsibility for it. It was your idea, no one else's. *Agreed?*" Dustin asks.

"Agreed. Let's go." He's almost out the door before he remembers something, something kind of important about stores. And shopping.

Something that kind of puts a dent in his plans, considering he's a little low on funds. "Wait-you guys have money, right?" Dustin shrugs and looks at Lucas. Lucas immediately looks at Will. Will sighs and turns to Joyce, who's just returned from the storage room. She stops when she sees the pleading looks on their faces.

"What now?" She asks, resigned.

"Can we-borrow some money?" her youngest son asks.

"Will..."she says softly. Money is pretty tight right now, and it doesn't help that Christmas is rapidly approaching.

"Lucas and Dustin will pay you back their share! And you can take mine out of my allowance. *For the next year*," he mumbles.

"If this is about a campaign..."she starts, wearily.

"It's not! It's for *El*. For her Christmas present."

"Presents," Dustin sighs, raising his eyebrows sardonically. "FOUR PRESENTS."

"It's really important! It's her first Christmas and everything..." he trails off, because she's already reaching for her purse. Ten minutes later, the guys are standing in front of one very fluffy kitten heap. The pile vibrates a little because they're all purring. Mike likes to think that they know they'll be going home together. "I'm getting her that one." Mike points to the one she held.

"They're pretty cute," Will says, "but...where were you planning on keeping them?"

"I...um. I-" Mike falls silent after his feeble attempt at a coherent sentence. He just hasn't planned that far ahead yet. He'll figure it out later.

Dustin sighs. "We can keep them at my house."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Mom will be thrilled," he says gloomily. "She hasn't exactly

gotten over the whole Mews thing yet. Enjoy your last Christmas, Wheeler," Dustin says sagely. "Hopper's going to murder you."

"Hopper owes me one. *More* than one."

Eleven comes over for Christmas dinner. As is tradition in the Wheeler house, Mike and his friends eat in the basement. Karen allows this only because Mike actually eats Christmas dinner twice every year. Once with the family, like a normal son. And once with his friends when they come over to play and squabble over their presents (and by the end of the evening, at least one of the new presents will be broken). When she arrives, she starts towards the basement. It's habit by now. Mike pulls her by the arm to stop her and she looks at him inquiringly.

"Not yet. We've got your presents down there, so we're gonna have to blindfold you." He's well aware that she uses a blindfold when she's using her powers, so he leaves it up to her. What she's okay with. "If that's all right? If not, we can just make you close your eyes, but you have to promise not to peek."

"It's all right," she says, and he whips out a blindfold. It's actually Lucas's headband, but it will do the trick. "Okay, hold still." She does, but he didn't really need to admonish her. She's always still. He carefully ties it over her eyes and waits for a few seconds before leading her anywhere. Just in case. "That okay?" She nods. "Okay. Follow me." He turns and he's opened the basement door before he realizes she's still just standing there. "Oh. Right." Comes back, takes her hand and gently leads her to the stairs.

"Okay, there's a step right here, so be careful," he starts but she's already missed it and her feet come down awkwardly. It's a lot more difficult-not to mention dangerous-to lead someone down a long flight of stairs this way than he expected and he curses.

"Sorry! Guys? *Little help?*" he yells.

"Mike, you *idiot*. I told you, we should have met her *upstairs*." Lucas is grumbling but he's already up the stairs and taking Eleven by one hand. Mike edges behind her, hovers his arms over her shoulders just in case he needs to pull her back. Will takes her other hand and they

carefully lead her down a step, walking very slowly. It's easiest to walk backwards with Dustin scouting the way for them. It's a team effort, like most of the things they do, and it works every time.

When she's finally down, they tow her towards the couch. Will puts a little pressure on her shoulders and she sits. "Okay, just wait there."

She starts to tug the blindfold off but Lucas grabs her hand. "Not yet! Just a second. We'll tell you when."

Will keeps a gentle hand on her shoulder, just in case she's afraid of the darkness. He knows what that's like now. She isn't, at least not when she's with her friends, but she appreciates the gesture.

"Just wait, you are going to *flip*," Dustin says excitedly. "And not like, into another dimension. The other guys roll their eyes at him. "*What?* What did I say?" he asks. They ignore him. It's Dustin's MO. He's always firmly against an idea and then, when he's forced to capitulate, he acts like it was his idea all along. He looks so eager; his friends can tell he expects all of the credit. If it goes over well, that is. Eleven realizes that she's heard from everyone except Mike in the last minute or so and gets a little fretful.

"Mike?"

"I'm here." And he is. His voice is so close it startles her. Something warm falls in her lap and she jumps again.

"*When*," Lucas says triumphantly, and removes her blindfold. But she doesn't need him to remove it. She felt their minds the second they touched her. She blinks down at her lap, where there's suddenly a wriggling mass of kittens. *Persians*, Mike called them. They have cute faces. She smiles at them. Her eyes are happier than they've ever seen, and all of them can see the change. Lucas makes a mental note. Wherever El is concerned, let Mike lead the way, because he's always right.

"They're...all mine?" She asks, just to be certain. Dustin squeezes next to her on the couch. "Yep! You like them?"

"Yes!"

"Tell that to Hopper," Will says under his breath, but Eleven takes no notice. Dustin points to one of the kittens, the one that's currently climbing her shoulder. "That one's from me." She feels it purring right next to her ear and laughs.

"That one's mine," Lucas says. It's the one with green eyes. The rest still have blue ones. She looks at Will, waiting. "This one," he says, nudging the one that's fallen off her lap and onto Dustin's leg. That only leaves the sole female of the litter, the one she held in the store, and she knows who gave her that one. Dustin, Lucas, and Will are squeezed awkwardly around her on the couch, playing with the kittens. They are all grinning and laughing because the Lucas kitten and the Dustin kitten are tussling. When she glances up, she sees Mike standing in front of her. He's not laughing, and he's not grinning. Although there's a tiny little smile on his face, his expression is serious. Thoughtful. She doesn't have to ask what he's thinking. She just knows, and without reading his mind. She feels it, too. The bad memories are still there, yes. They always will be. But eventually, they will be covered under better memories. Happier memories, like this one, surrounded by friends who love her.

She can feel it.

Hopper picks her up two hours later. They've neglected to buy a carrier, so Mike scrounged in the garage until he found something suitable. He calls it an *easter basket*. They all walk her to the waiting station wagon. Will walks her because he's polite, Mike because she's Eleven. Lucas and Dustin only want to see the look on Hopper's face. It's going to be *awesome*.

"You have fun?" he asks her gruffly. She looks like she had more than fun. She looks ecstatic. She's carrying a basket. Gently, not swinging it. "What's that?" He's a cop, and that means he sees more than most people. He sees Lucas elbow Dustin before stifling a giggle and he sighs.

"My presents."

He doesn't ask. Doesn't need to. He can hear the tiny mewing coming from behind the wicker. "You gave her a *cat*?" He asks Mike incredulously. He's still a cop. Still sees more than most people. He

*definitely* sees the cool look on Mike's face. It is calm and defiant all at once.

"Nope."

"No?"

"We gave her *four cats*."

Hopper's eye twitches alarmingly. Once. He turns to Eleven, ready to tell her that she cannot have cats. Not *four*, not *three*, not *two*. *Maybe* one. Maybe not. He hasn't decided yet. He sees the peace on her face and stops himself. She's never looked that way before. He gives Mike a curt look. The look clearly says, *fine. I owed you one. Now we're even*. The look also says, *you pull anything like this again, and you're dead*. Mike raises his eyebrows and inclines his head slightly. Hopper's already folded himself behind the wheel. He hates cats.

This time, Eleven hugs them all. One by one. In order of their ranking on her list. The people she likes. The people she loves. Starting from the last to the first. "Thank you," she says. She's speaking to all of them at once. She's also speaking only to Mike. She meets his gaze again. He still looks serious, solemn and happy all at once. It makes her a little nervous. In a good way.

*You're welcome.*